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ABSTRACT

A study of the social environment in special schools for the deaf is reported in this publication. The problem was to deinstitutionalize the dormitory environment, and to stimulate an involvement in the surroundings and a sense of personal pride in the children. Research was carried out at the Ontario School for the Deaf, Belleville, with a group of boys aged 16-20. The booklet contains a step-by-step development of a large dormitory space from its initial open plan to a series of segmented, individual areas. Isometric drawings and photographs illustrate the development. (KK)

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dorm 8

An Experimental Social Study

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Schools for the Blind and the Deaf
by
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of the
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Senior Boys' Residence
Ontario School for the Deaf
Belleville

Introduction

Children with severe vision and hearing handicaps usually require a special educational program. In order to provide a full range of specialized facilities, staff, and a specially structured after-school program, it is frequently necessary to bring such children together into a residential school. Soon after Confederation, the Ontario government established residential facilities for the blind and the deaf. It is not uncommon for a child to enter one of these schools at the age of 5 and stay, (except for holidays and weekends, if travel distances permit) until he is 20. Therefore, the school environment becomes a major factor during the formative years of a child's life, yet very little research has been done about accommodation for younger children.

A study of the social environment of special schools was undertaken. The problem was to deinstitutionalize the environment and to stimulate an involvement in the surroundings and a sense of personal pride in the children. The opportunity arose to test the premises at the Ontario School for the Deaf, Belleville, with a group of boys aged 16 - 20.

In 1870 the Ontario government established the first provincial residential school for the deaf at Belleville on a 75-acre site overlooking the Bay of Quinte a mile and a half from the town centre.

The pilot study considered one dormitory room in a pair of residences, one for boys and one for girls, that were designed by the Ontario Department of Public Works in 1912 and formally opened by the Hon. W. H. Hearst, Premier of Ontario, on October 30, 1914.

The Neo-Georgian residences mirror one another across a tree studded avenue. Originally 152 students were housed in eight dormitory rooms. During the years the number of students in each room has been reduced and one dorm has become a communal playroom. The 90th anniversary issue of the school paper said "The buildings have seen very few changes indeed, indicating that quality materials were used in the construction".

The basic building has the charm of its vintage, derived from the manipulation of simple direct volumetric shapes knowingly punctuated with holes for windows and doors. But buildings are important only if they have significance in human terms as settings for constructive living.

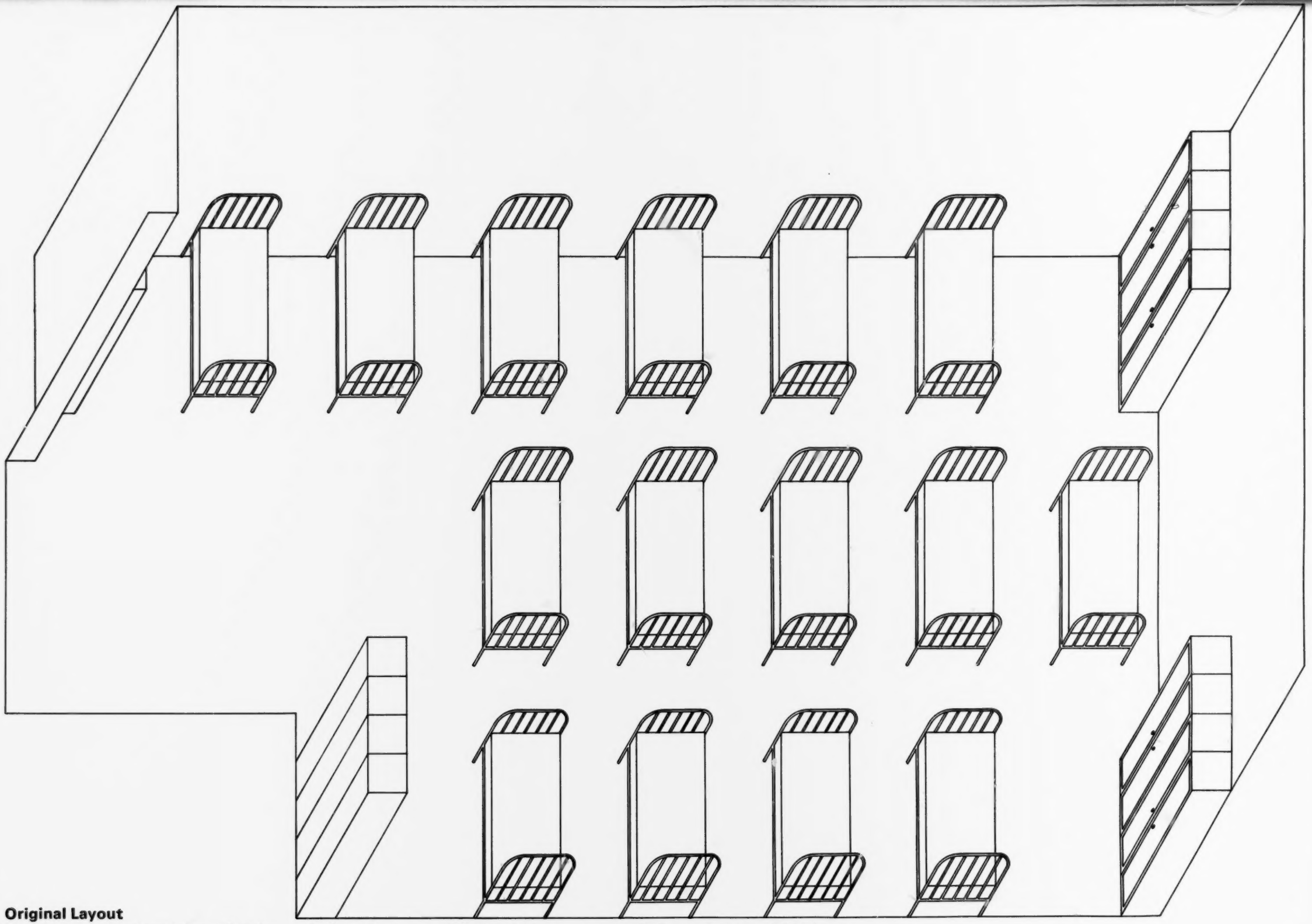
Patterns of life style have changed drastically since 1914 and desirable housing standards of Edwardian times have become sub-standard in the space age. But bricks and mortar don't change easily. The solidity of the building prevented it from keeping pace with the times.

For a number of years the staff of the school have recognized the need to renovate or replace the dormitory buildings. Studies showed that complete renovation was not financially viable and the age of the structure prohibited remodelling. The study of Dorm 8 is intended to provide environmental parameters for the design of the new residential accommodation. In order not to prejudice the case for the new facilities and to minimize the expenditure, the design study was based on a group of furniture components that could be relocated in the new buildings.

The view was accepted that "group living becomes acceptable and can contribute to the development of one's own personality only if individuality can continuously be expressed in all important activities and experiences". *

It was felt that when the student's own private space or the dormitory building becomes uniform or impersonal, there is the danger of life becoming simply a matter of performing routine activities—washing, eating, resting. The problem was to devise a setting which recognized the dignity of the individual in today's terms.

* Bettleheim, Bruno, *Truants for Life*, 1955, Glencoe Free Press

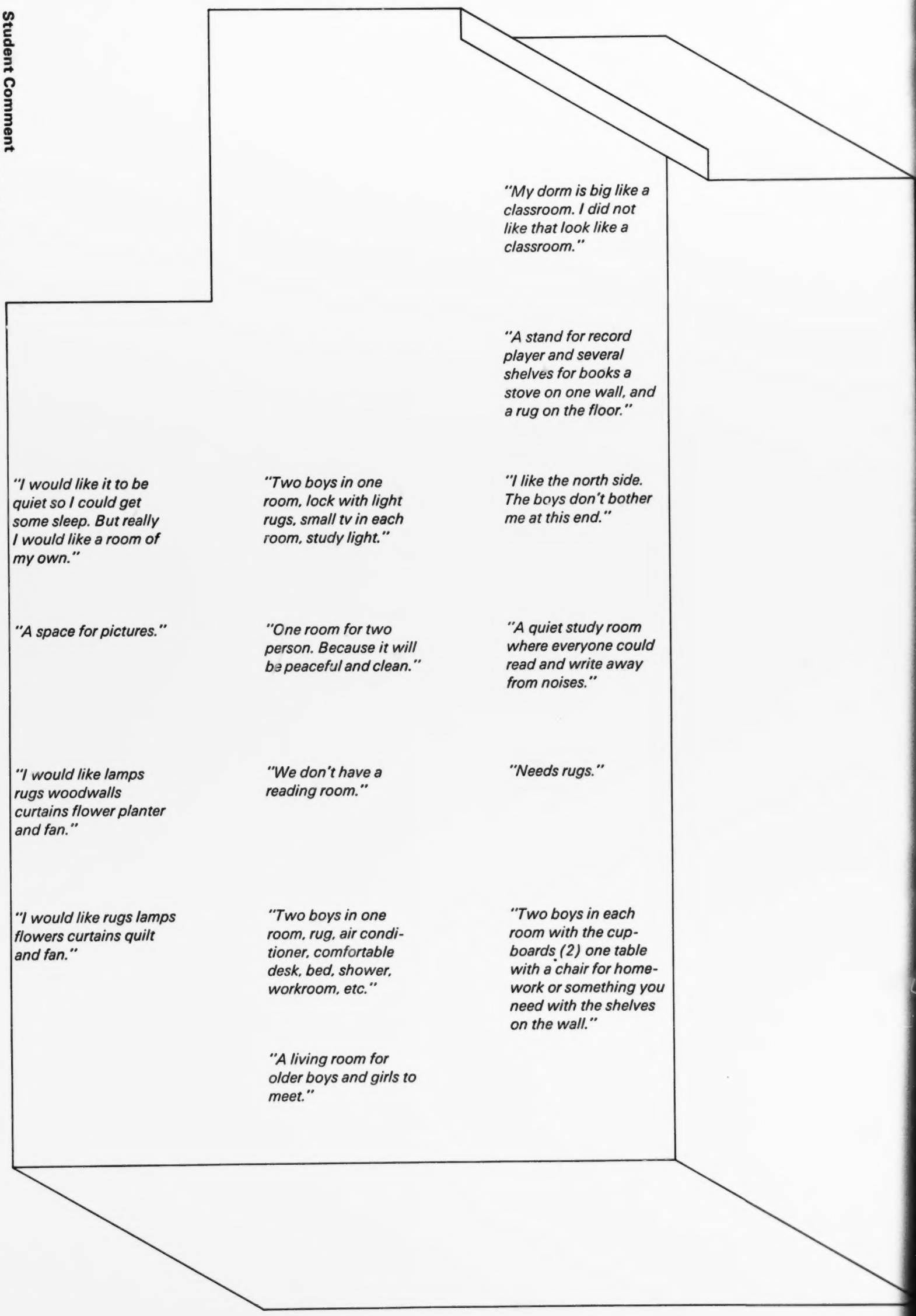


Original Layout

In the existing dormitory layout 15 beds were ranged down the room in three rows. The openness of the arrangement resulted in a territorial ambiguity and the occupants of the centre row of beds had a sense of disorientation and a feeling of exposure. Wooden lockers were grouped at the ends of the room further fragmenting any claims to a personal area and the separation of storage from the bed space was highly inconvenient. The lack of personal storage and pin-up space restricted any graphic expression of individuality. The hard floor was cold to the feet and with the drab monotone color scheme and poor lighting there was a total lack of any visual stimulation.

Student Comment

Communication difficulties ruled out the possibilities of a formal use and opinion sample, however, an informal survey of boys ages 16-21 produced the above comments:



"My dorm is big like a classroom. I did not like that look like a classroom."

"A stand for record player and several shelves for books a stove on one wall, and a rug on the floor."

"I would like it to be quiet so I could get some sleep. But really I would like a room of my own."

"Two boys in one room, lock with light rugs, small tv in each room, study light."

"I like the north side. The boys don't bother me at this end."

"A space for pictures."

"One room for two person. Because it will be peaceful and clean."

"A quiet study room where everyone could read and write away from noises."

"I would like lamps rugs woodwalls curtains flower planter and fan."

"We don't have a reading room."

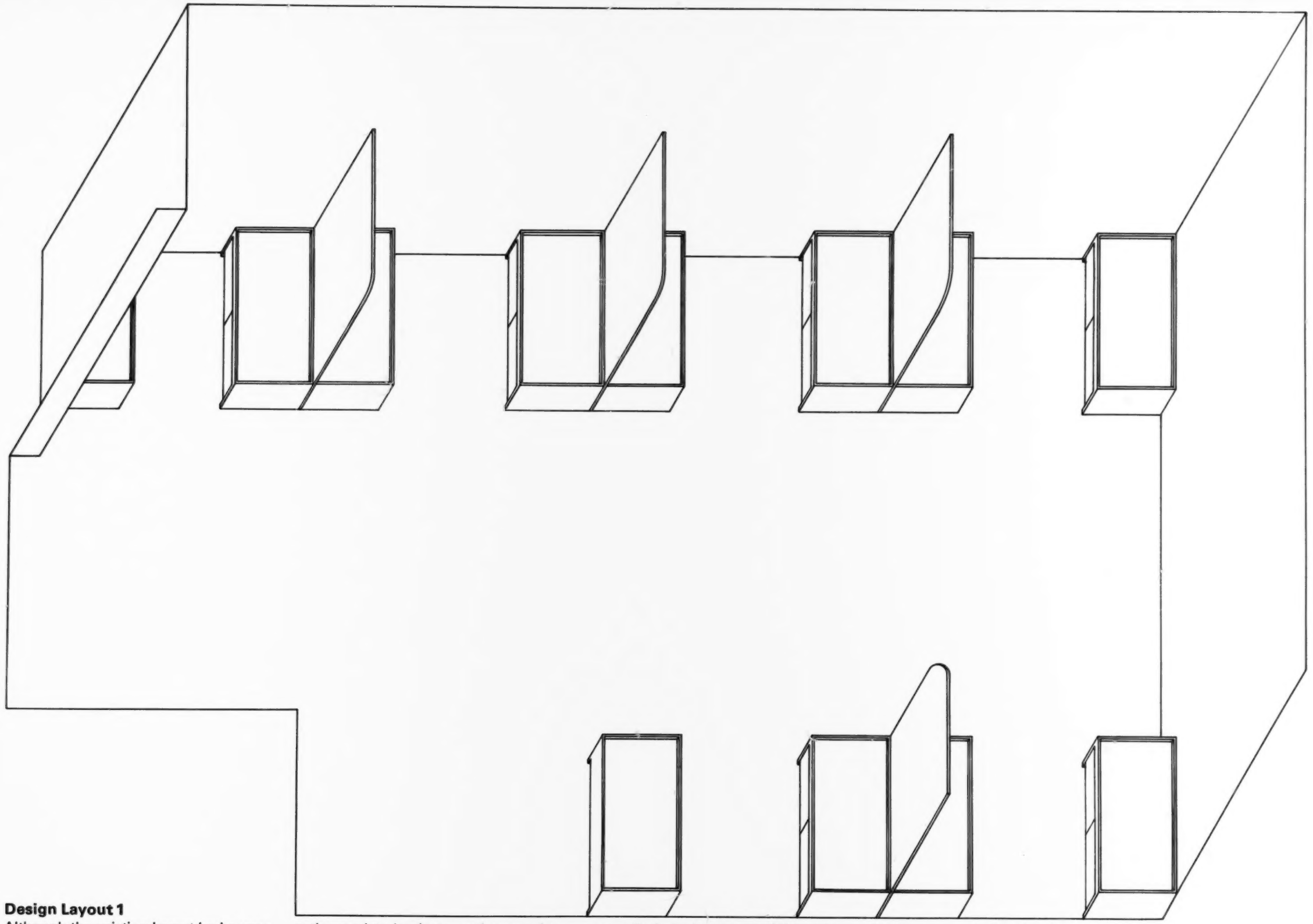
"Needs rugs."

"I would like rugs lamps flowers curtains quilt and fan."

"Two boys in one room, rug, air conditioner, comfortable desk, bed, shower, workroom, etc."

"Two boys in each room with the cupboards (2) one table with a chair for homework or something you need with the shelves on the wall."

"A living room for older boys and girls to meet."

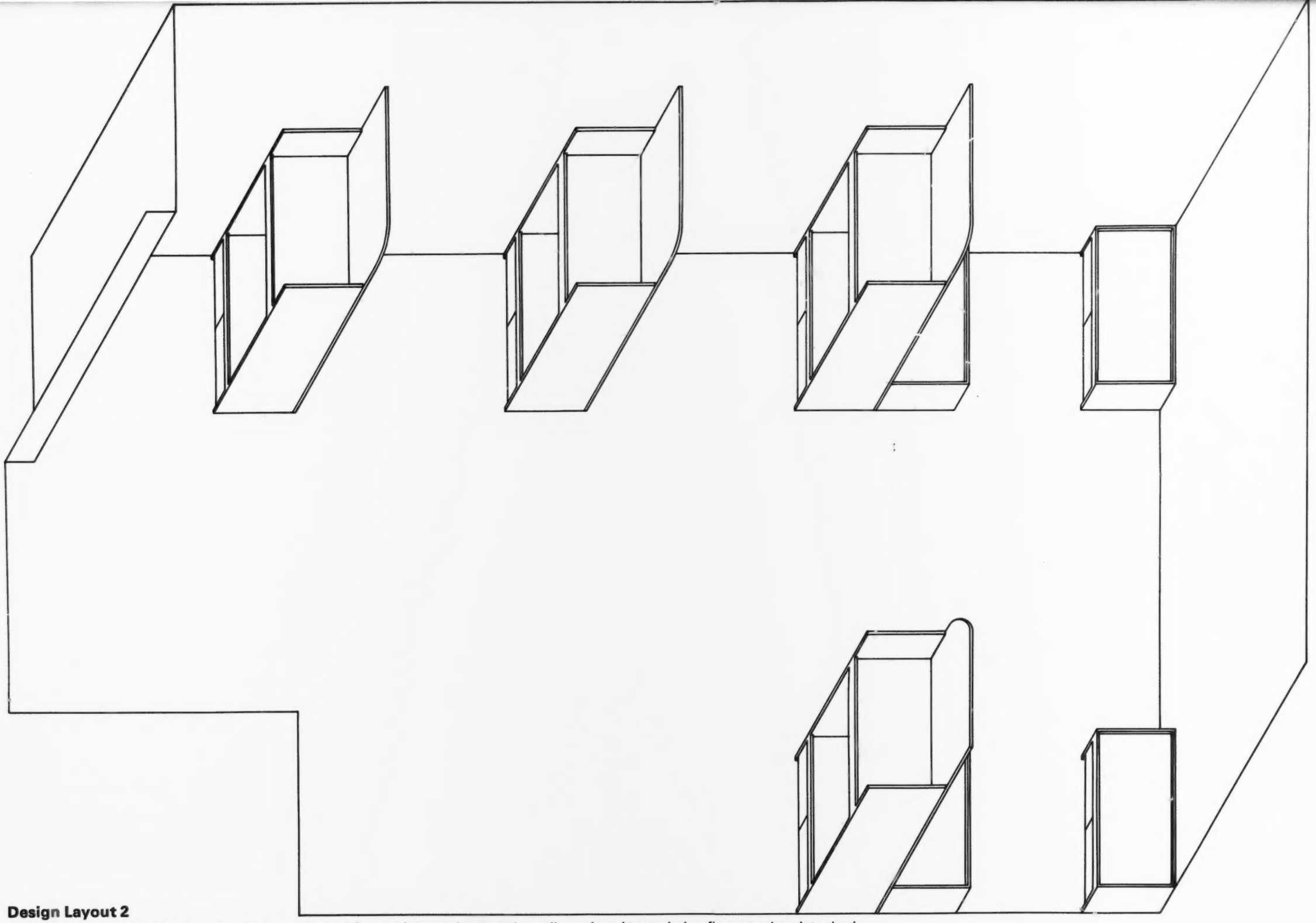


Design Layout 1

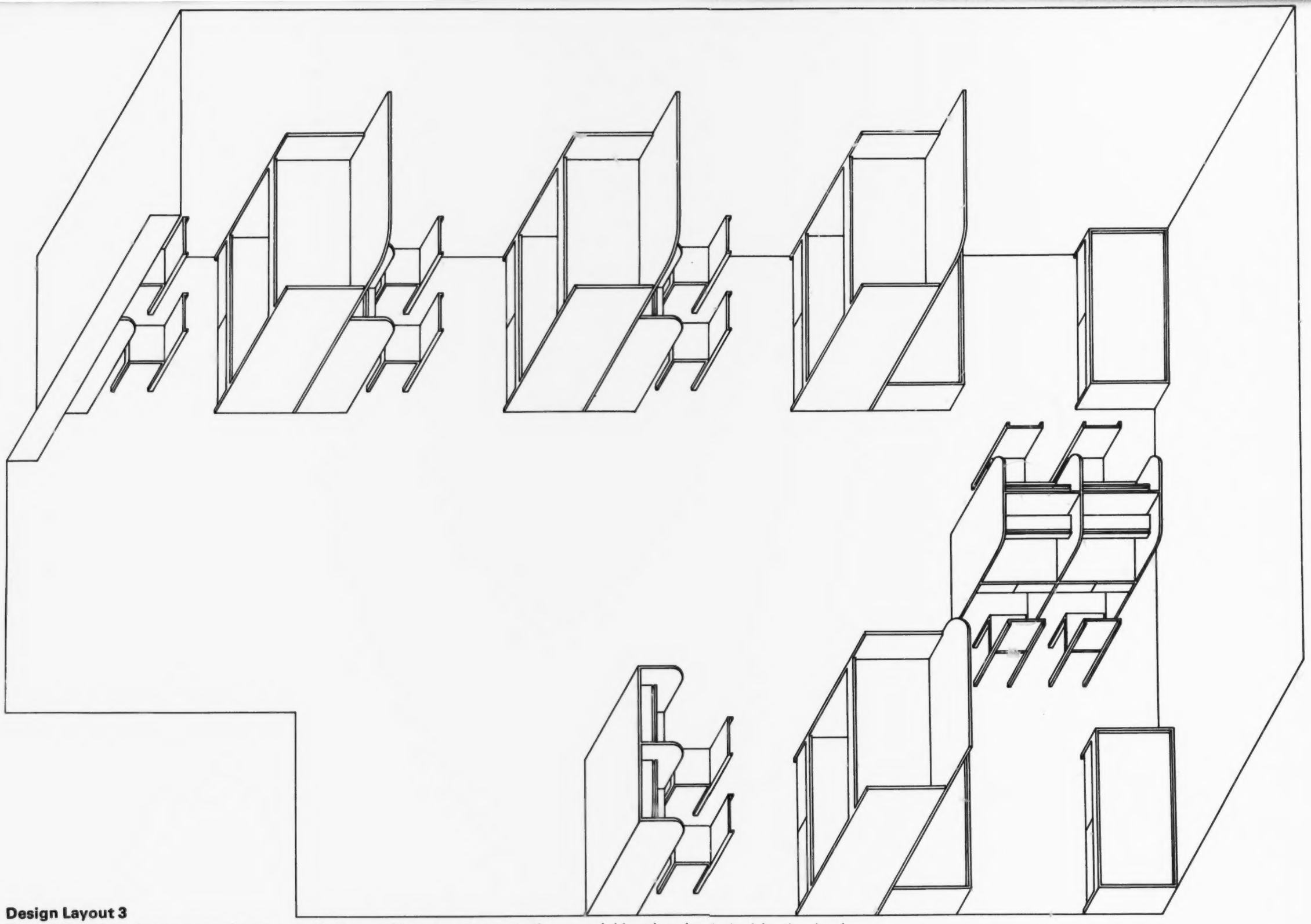
Although the existing layout had a very utilitarian character the boys only slept and stored their clothes in the room so, in fact, it was under used.

By placing a screen between two beds it was possible to move them together and to begin to evolve a series of six semi-private territorial areas. The arrangement provided a more significant area of personal floor space and the screens created a sense of enclosure. One corner of the dorm was used as a counsellor's bedroom on nights when he was required to sleep-in. Accommodation was found for him elsewhere and two boys were moved into this room.

The path to the fire exit had to be kept open and this developed into a small lounge area which provides a buffer zone between the private space and the activity of the total residence.

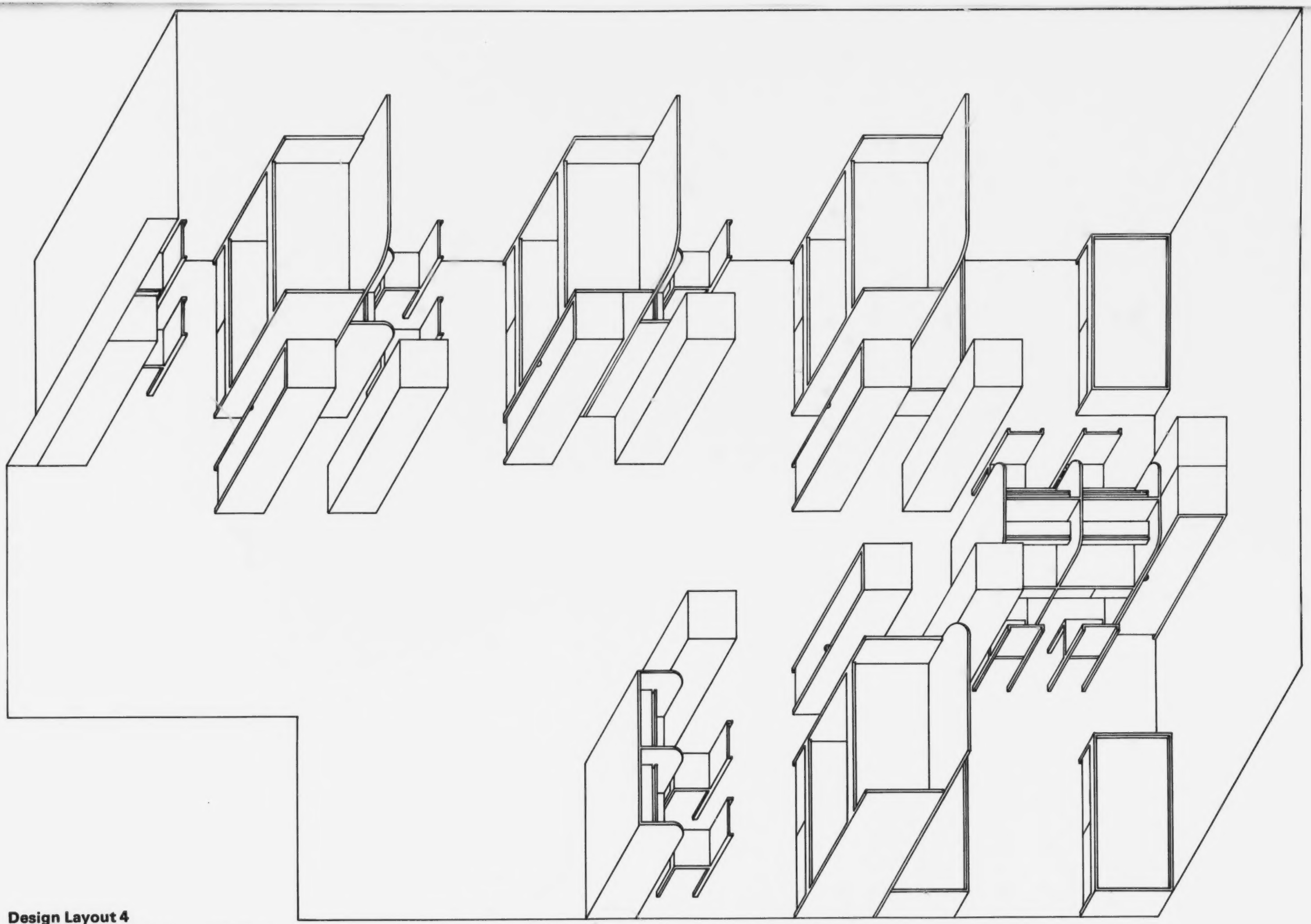


Design Layout 2
By arranging the eight beds as bunks it was possible to provide each boy with a study carrel with their individual area, which they desired. Thus the semi-private spaces became positive activity territories rather than just sleeping units. Vertical fins which reach up to the ceiling provide visual privacy for the occupants of the top bunks. The fins also serve to identify the territorial areas and to visually modulate the air space above the 6 ft 6 in. screens. When the furniture is relocated the fins can be detached and the bunks can be easily modified into single beds.

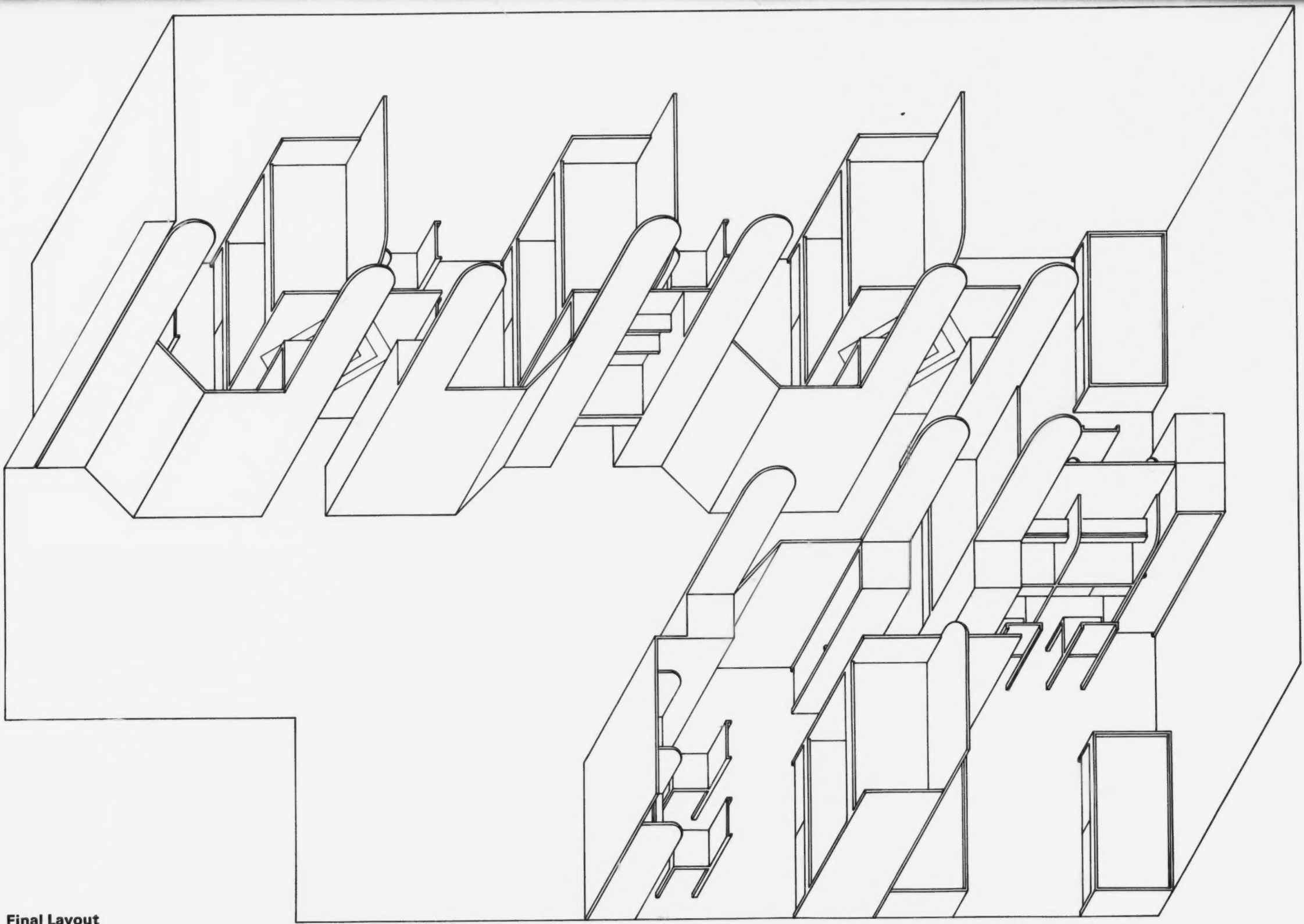


Design Layout 3
The existing dorm layout necessitated that all studying had to be done in a communal study hall and there was no place to read in private. The provision of study carrels allows development of self-discipline, permits the extension of study time and increases concentration by reducing visual distractions. Gable ends on the carrels obscure sight lines onto the adjacent desk.

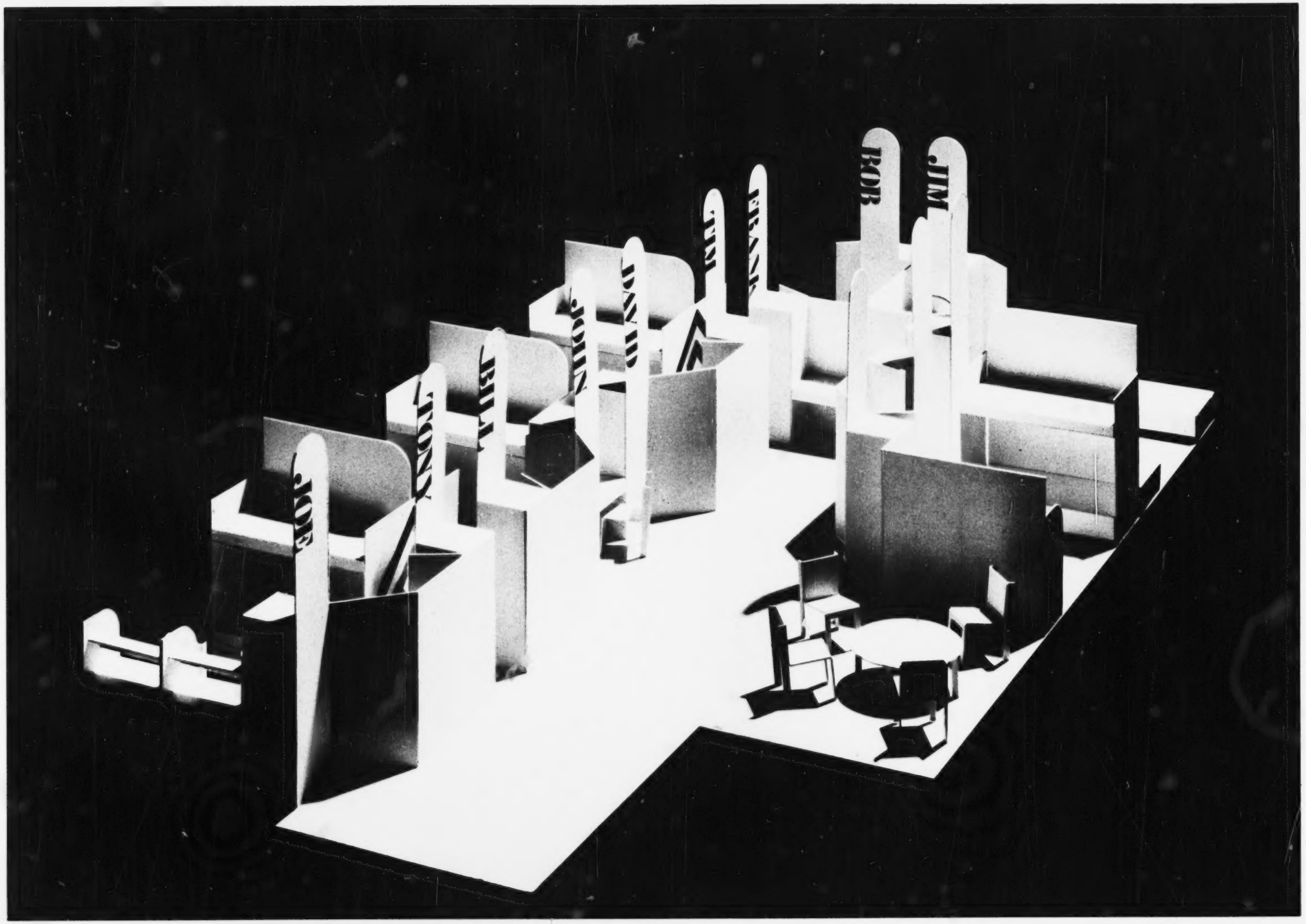
The tack board extension on the back of the carrels (which screens the neighbouring bunk beds), the book shelf and desk drawers provide places to display and store possessions thereby enhancing the possibility for personal expression.



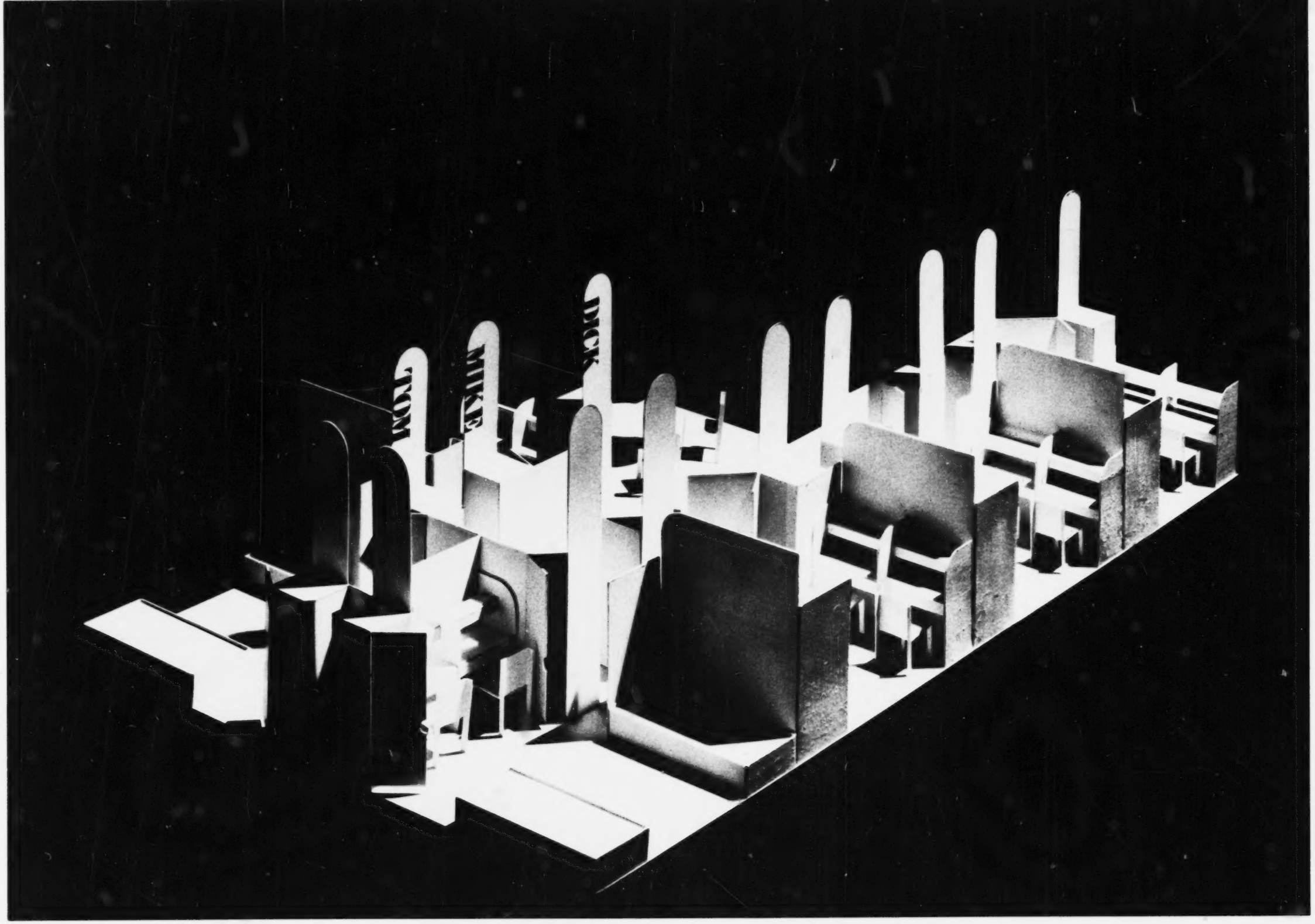
Design Layout 4
Cupboards or wardrobes with their screen extensions define the far side of the territorial area. By staggering wardrobe locations sufficient space is provided for both boys to simultaneously use the large mirrors that are fastened inside the wardrobe doors without getting in one another's way. The cupboards are equipped with several shelves, clothes rod and a plastic tote tray drawer, all of which can be adjusted to suit personal desires. Each boy also has a large drawer under the lower bunk bed for more bulky items. A lock on the wardrobe ensures the owner's privacy for it was felt that finding one's self as an individual is aided when personal possessions are respected.



Final Layout
An environment that the boys can relate to and take pride in was produced by the introduction of well-designed furniture, carpeting and the combination of neutral areas with stimulation points of intense colour and valid texture. The furniture is natural birch and white plastic laminate, the screens and fins are all painted white. Grey indoor/outdoor carpeting is used throughout and the existing lighting has been supplemented by an additional centre row of fixtures and the individual fluorescent fittings in the study carrels. The white paint on the ceiling has been carried down to the picture rail while an intense yellow has been used on the walls of the basic room, which within the private territories is reduced to an accent area. The recessed access to the bed spaces are accentuated by vivid diamond bands of colour and these colours are repeated on the Indian linen bedspreads.



Final Model



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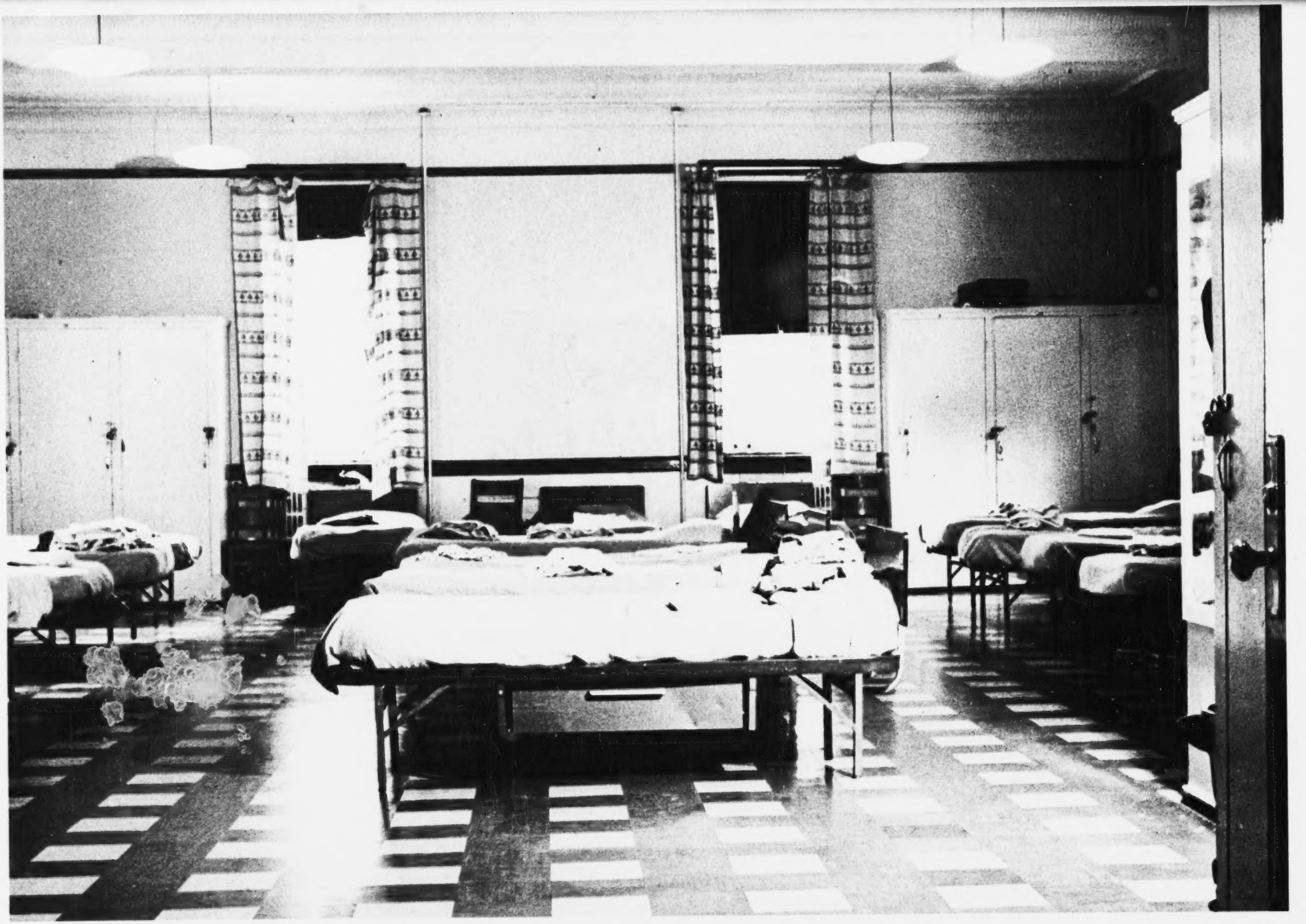
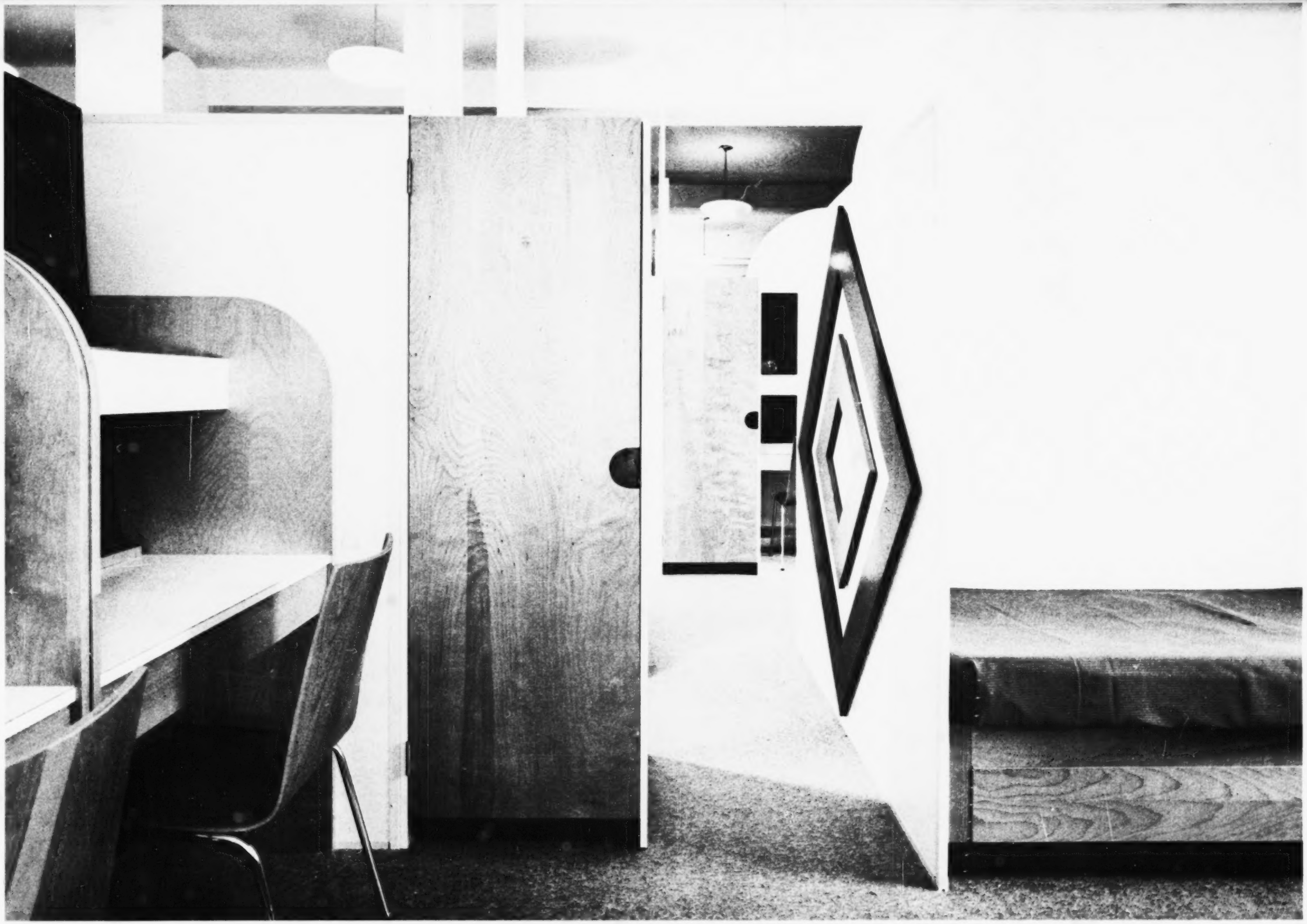


Original Interior

Social Area



Study and Sleeping Area